"The Rise of Monasticism"
Lynn Harry Nelson (2001)

There were two ancient Near-Eastern customs that contributed to the development of Christian monasticism.

One must remember that the distinction between the tilled and irrigated fields surrounding the villages of Egypt and Syria was very clear. Beyond the fields was "the desert," rocky and waterless land, with a sparse vegetation of brambles, nettles, and thornbushes, and incapable of supporting human habitation. It was the site of caves and small springs of brackish or salty water, abounding in poisonous snakes, lizards of all sorts, and watched over by vultures. From time immemorial, however, men and women had left their villages to live nearby in these badlands and to seek -- with the aid of solitude, exposure to the weather, and in hunger and thirst -- a deeper knowledge of the universe and the role of human beings in it, and perhaps to experience a mystic ecstacy in which they felt themselves united with the universe and its god.

Such people, hermits [a word that comes from *eremus*, or "desert," and meaning "desert dwellers"], were regarded by the local villagers as holy men. They would take offerings of food to the hermits near their village, and the hermits would give them wise advise. Some hermits subjected themselves to rather extreme forms of self punishment to drive out cravings for worldly things, and the villagers, admiring such conduct, would sometimes travel long distances to see and offer sustenance.

Associated with this custom was the popular custom of going out into the desert to seek enlightenment, particularly when confronted with some important decision or when dissatisfied with life in general. Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and Muhammad, as well as the entire Israelite people, among many others, retreated into the desert and found the reason for their lives there.

Source URL: http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/monasticism.html
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl201/

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

Many early Christians went into the desert to escape the persecutions of Diocletian's reign, and some were hunted down and martyred there, thus enhancing the idea in the minds of the early Christians that the desert was in some special way the place to seek communion with God. With Constantine and the rise of the Christian Church to the status of official and sole religion of the Roman Empire, there were some who felt that the flood of new converts and the new ease of being Christian were somehow diluting the purity and zeal of the early faith. Then, too, disputes soon arose among Christian leaders each attempting to establish his own understanding of the faith as the One True Doctrine. Many devout believers were unwilling to accept a world in which faith was contaminated with bitter disputes for the power to dictate the nature of the faith and the proper form of its practice. Some of those believers abandoned this world and retreated into the desert to seek the foundations of faith in a more elemental manner.

One of these was a young man named Anthony (251-356), a resident of Alexandria in Egypt. He went into the desert at the age of fifteen and remained there, living a life of extreme austerity for the next ninety years. As time passed, Anthony became widely known as a model of the *eremitical* (hermit) life. Numbers of young men came to the desert to join him in order to learn from him and to attempt to follow his way of life themselves. Through a famous biography written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Anthony became still more widely known and the influence of his example spread far beyond Egypt. Collections of hermits were soon establishing themselves in various almost-uninhabitable places throughout the Eastern Roman Empire.

Why did Anthony become so highly regarded and why was his example so influential? Why were young men and women, but especially young men, so eager to give up all of the pleasures of the world and to abandon their families, friends, and -- something that was extremely important to the people of the time -- to give up their hopes that their name and

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

family would live on through their children? If we are to rely entirely the account in Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony*, it was not only because people believed that the world was filled with demons that sought to lead men and women off the path that led to eternal life and that Anthony's way of life prepared people to fight off these evil forces. Apart from this, Athanasius portrayed Anthony as if he were a professional wrestler in training. In doing so, he tapped both the religious fervor and the sports fever that were characteristic of the common men and women of the Eastern Empire. The monks were known as "athletes of Christ," and so were doubly worthy of emulation.

But the number of people who gathered around models of the eremitical life made the point of it all -- to live alone -- a difficult matter. It eventually became necessary to develop some form of regulation to allow hermits to live in close proximity to each other while still maintaining a life of isolation. Pachomius (290-346) developed a *Rule* that attempted to solve that problem. Under this Rule, the monks lived in isolated huts, gathering only for meals and even then not speaking to each other. Pachomius went a step further, however, and stated that the monks living under his Rule should work to produce their own food and clothing. In this way, they were no longer dependent upon the charity that the public could spare for their sustenance, and the number of people who could adopt this *cenobitical* life (meaning "life in common") became, for all purposes, unlimited. After the reforms of Pachomius, the number of monasteries and of monks began to increase rapidly in the East.

Pachomius' reforms were carried still further by Basil. The Rule that Basil wrote in about 360 abandoned the concepts of isolation and extreme asceticism that had been characteristic of Anthony's approach to the spiritual life. Under Basil's Rule, the monks lived and worked together, and were supposed to form a community based upon moderation and fellowship. So it was that only four years after

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

Anthony's death, the monastic ideal had become so moderated that it was nothing like what had originally attracted people to it.

While this strange transformation had been occurring in the East, attempts to spread the monastic ideal to the West had been largely unsuccessful. Athanasius spent several years in exile in the West about the middle of the fourth century and had attempted to spread the ideal of St. Anthony there. Perhaps the greatest Western follower of the monastic ideal of the time was Martin of Tours (316-397), a cavalryman from the Danubian frontier who became the most famous and influential spiritual leader of early medieval Western Europe. He was best known for having torn his cavalry cloak (*capella* in half to share with a naked beggar in the midst of winter. The cloak was preserved and became a powerful relic. Charlemagne took it to Aachen to place in his palace church, which soon became known as "the Capella" as a result. In time, most Carolingian churches came to be called by the same name, and our modern word "chapel" is derived from St. Martin's cloak.

Despite his admiration of Anthony, Martin seemed incapable of emulating him. Even before embarking on his spiritual life, Martin had displayed an attention to the plight of the poor that played little or no part in Anthony's solitary search for the holy life. Moreover, as soon as Martin was discharged from the army, he began to attempt to convert his family and comrades. Anthony had shown little interest in Jesus' admonition "to spread the Good News to the nations," which was something that Martin was constantly involved in promoting. Finally, Anthony had lived his ninety years free from any responsibility for anyone or anything, while Martin soon found himself bishop of Tours, a difficult administrative and political task that absorbed much of his energy for the rest of his life.

These same demands limited the influence of the most important center of eastern monasticism in the West. An eastern monk by the name of

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

Honoratus established a community on the isle of Lèrins, off the coast of southern France, a community that soon developed a school of Christian doctrine and became a model of the monastic life. A number of brilliant men gathered there, but, one after the other, they were called forth to assume the responsibilities of bishoprics and the leadership of missionary churches. The most famous of the students of Lèrins was the Englishman, Patrick. After some time in the monastic life of Lèrins, Patrick felt the missionary call, and left to complete the conversion of Ireland. His love of the monastery did not desert him, however, and influenced the form of Christianity that he shaped. Ireland developed a set of ecclesiastical institutions peculiar to itself. Unlike those lands that had once been part of the Roman empire, Ireland did not have an urban infrastructure. Its population was grouped in clans -- something like the smaller groups that joined together to form North American Indian tribes. The clansmen often lived in small, scattered settlements, coming together for special purposes in the fortified village in which the hereditary chief of the clan resided. Irish Christianity adapted to these circumstances. Monasteries were established in virtually each of the many clans that made up the Irish folk, and the abbots became in many ways as much clan chieftains as monastic rulers. Many such abbots were regarded in their lifetime as saints. There are even accounts of instances in which entire monasteries, each under their own saintly abbot, did battle with each other for one reason or another.

The Irish attempted to follow the eastern mode of an ascetic life, but they were also convinced of the need to spread the word of Christianity. They went about this in a unique way. A group of missionary-monks would board one of the flimsy leather and wicker boats that were used by the Irish, push out to sea, and go wherever the current took them. One such group landed on the island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland, where they founded what became a famous and influential monastery. The monks of Iona soon managed to convert southern Scotland and the North of England to Christianity, and they founded still

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

other monasteries there, the most famous being Lindisfarne, on an island off the eastern coast of Northumbria. Although their practices differed from the Christians following the practices ordained by the bishop of Rome, the Irish were quite learned and skillful. They had close contact by sea with Spain and, through Spain, with the Byzantine world and so were able, in the seventh and eighth centuries, to contribute to what is sometimes called the Northumbrian Renaissance. For a time, the North of England was one of the most cultured regions in Western Europe.

Monasticism did not spread as rapidly on the continent as in the British Isles, perhaps because monastic practice still had not developed a character that struck a responsive chord in the people of the West or a form that met the needs of their society. This development was reserved for Benedict of Nursia (480- 543), who founded the great monastery of Monte Cassino, where he wrote his *Holy Rule*

Benedict had studied law before adopting a monastic life, and he defined his monastery as a corporation. More to the point, however, he emphasized obedience and discipline, regular and congregate meals, a moderate life divided equally between work, sleep and prayer, standard dress to be drawn from a common store, a series of special offices to regulate the communal life and a number of other, similar, things. His monastery was to be much like an army unit, and he freely used military terminology in writing his *Rule*. He referred to his monastic community as a *schola*, a word from which we derived "school," but which originally referred to an elite army unit. The features of regularity, moderation and, above all, discipline particularly appealed to the people of the West, and the military ideal was one that attracted them. Benedict's form of monastery slowly began to spread and eventually became the standard form for almost all western monasteries. Moreover, the Benedictine monks became known, not as "athletes of Christ" as were their eastern counterparts, but *militi Christi*, "soldiers of Christ," and military imagery became a permanent aspect of western

Source URL: http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/monasticism.html
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl201/

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

Christianity.

But the *Benedictine Rule* had an even greater importance for western attitudes and values. It stated that the abbot was in complete control of the monastery, but that he had to consult with the entire body of monks on all important matters, take responsibility for his decisions, and observe the regulations set forth in the *Rule*. In addition, it required the congregation to read and discuss the *Rule*, chapter by chapter, each day, beginning over again once they had completed it. This may not seem very important, but consider that the abbot's powers were limited and that the principle of limited sovereignty was a new concept in the West. Moreover, the abbot's authority was limited by the *Rule*, which everyone was to know and which governed all of the monastery's affairs. The *Rule* was, therefore, a written constitution, something that the founders of the United States felt was a great step forward for individual liberty and which the subjects of Great Britain even now do not possess.

Then, too, all of the monks were equal in status. Although their offices might give some a certain authority over the others, this was a result of the office and did not belong to the man himself. There were neither nobles nor commoners in a Benedictine monastery. When they passed through the door of the monastery and were "born again" into the monastic life, they were born equal. This was a revolutionary idea for secular society when,in 1776, when it was written into the American Declaration of Independence.

Finally, all members of a community living under the Benedtine Rule were expected to work. In almost all previous societies, people tried to gain a position of wealth and power that would allow them to avoid labor. Benedict stated that work joyously performed was itself a praise of God. People sometimes speak of "the Protestant Work Ethic." Although it is true that the value placed upon labor as somehow ennobling is almost unique to western society, the idea was developed

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.

and practiced long before the Protestant Reformation.

In any event, the Benedictine form of monasticism proved congenial to the inhabitants of western Europe, and the monk came to symbolize for many the ideal form of Christian life.

Source URL: http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/monasticism.html
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl201/

© Lynn Harry Nelson (http://www.vlib.us/medieval/lectures/)
Used by permission.